A STUDY OF 'GAY CULTURE' IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF R.RAJ RAO, SHYAM SELVADURAI AND DAVID LEVITHAN

SYNOPSIS

OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH WORK FOR THE REGISTRATION

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APPENDIX - 1

Title of the Thesis: A Study of 'gay culture' in the select novels of R.Raj Rao, Shyam Selvadurai and David Levithan

Introduction:

The proposed work is an effort to present plight of homosexual males in the contemporary world through the select works of R.Raj Rao, Shyam Selvadurai and David Levithan. R.Raj Rao, born 1955, is a writer, teacher of literature and one of India's leading gay-rights activists. *The Boyfriend* (2003) of R.Raj Rao is one of the first gay novels to come from India. R.Raj Rao is one of the first recipients of the newly-established Quebec-India awards. He earned a Ph.D. in English from the University of Bombay in 1986 and received the Nehru Centenary British Fellowship for his post-doctoral research at the Centre for Caribbean Studies, University of Warwick, U.K. He attended the International Writing Program, Iowa, in 1996. His works include *Slide Show* (poems)(1992). He has edited Ten Indian Writers in Interview and co-edited *Image of India in the Indian Novel in English (1960–1980)* (1993). His other works are *Nissim Ezekiel: The Authorized Biography* (Viking, 2000), *One Day I Locked My Flat in Soul City* (Harper Collins India, 2001), short stories, *The Wisest Fool on Earth and Other Plays*, *The Boyfriend* (Penguin, 2003), novel, *Whistling in the Dark: Twenty-One Queer Interviews* (Sage, 2009), co-editor with Dibyajyoti Sarma, *Hostel Room 131* (2010), novel, *Ten Indian Authors in Interview*, editor. R.Raj Rao works as a professor and head of the English Department at the University of Pune. R.Raj Rao, who himself is a gay and writes exactly what he felt and bore in Indian society. His select works give a glimpse of life of gay people in India and mind set of homosexual males living in India.

Shyam Selvadurai, born on 12 February 1965, is a Sri Lankan Canadian novelist who wrote *Funny Boy* (1994), which won him the Books in Canada First Novel Award and Lambada Award

in the same year. His other novels are *Cinnamon Gardens* (1998), *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* (2005), *The Story Wallah: Short Fiction from South Aisan Writers* (2005), *The Hungry Ghosts* (2013). Shyam Selvadurai is basically from Colombo, Sri Lanka and all of his works are set in his native place. Shyam Selvadurai details the predicament of homosexual males of Sri Lanka, where homosexuality is illegal under a broad provision dealing with "gross indecency". Shyam Selvadurai's protagonists are all Tamils living in Sinhalese majority nation. He somewhere also discusses the civil war of his native land but his main concern is to highlight the lives and stories of gays in an adverse situation. It is the plight of these gay to live in constant fear and to suffer. Shyam Selvadurai also signaled in his works that there is no place for gay in a war-torn country, one like his. His select works fall in all sub genres of gay literature; gay teen, gay mystery and gay horror. Shyam Selvadurai is one of the famous gay writers many aspirant writers are now interested in his writings and are following him.

David Levithan, born on September 7, 1972, is an American young-adult fiction editor and award-winning author. His first book, *Boy Meets Boy*, was published in 2003. He has written numerous works featuring strong male gay characters, most notably *Boy Meets Boy* and *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist* (2006). He also won Lambda Literary Award for *Boy Meets Boy* in the year 2003 and again for *The Full Spectrum* in 2006.

Boy Meets Boy (2003), *The Realm of Possibility* (2004), *Are We There Yet?* (2005), *Marly's Ghost: A Remix of Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol, illustrated by Brian Selznick* (2005), *Wide Awake* (2006), *Love Is the Higher Law* (2009), *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*, co-written with John Green (2010), *The Lover's Dictionary* (2011), *Every You, Every Me* (2011), *Every Day* (2012), *Invisibility*, co-written with Andrea Cremer (2013), *Two Boys Kissing* (2013) are his works in fiction. United States of America is among few countries which legalized gay relations and gay marriages.

David Levithan's protagonists live in a country where homosexuality has been accepted openly. Moreover, his gay protagonists hardly ever experience any kind of ignorance and hatred in their respective societies. They live in an open and free world which brings frustrations in life because of its materialistic nature. David Levithan is contemporary to Shyam Selvadurai and his works throw light on the other side of the world where all kind of relations are welcomed.

A brief review of the work already done in the field:

Gay literature which comes under Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) studies is an innovative, current concept and fresh from the cultural oven. There is much to explore in this field and many writers from all over the world are writing in the field. Some famous names are: James Arthur Baldwin, Edward Albee, Larry Kramer, Shyam Selvadurai, David Levithan, R.Raj Rao, Rahul Mehta and many more. Some important works already done in the field and will be referred are: *Queer Theory, Gender Theory: An Instant Primer* by Riki Wilchins, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* by Annamarie Jagose and *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* by Michel Foucault. Some articles and journals would also be referred.

Objectives:

The objective of the work is to present a picture of homosexual males in the contemporary society and to mark the common illusions spread against homosexual males and entire LGBT community. It is also an effort for researchers and readers to explore and know more about gay community so that their plight could be easily understood.

Noteworthy contribution in the field of proposed work:

Tara Sehgal, blogger in *India Today* has reviewed R.Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend* posted on May 5th, 2003, IBNLive featured a video on R.Raj Rao's *Hostel Room 131* posted on web on December 01, 2011. A dissertation work on the works of Shyam Selvadurai and others was published in the year 2011, *"This Sweet Touch": Alienation and Physical Connection in the Works of Michael Ondaatje, Shyam Selvadurai, and Salman Rushdie* by James Sherwood Smith (Author), Scott Mitchell (Author) by Proquest, Umi Dissertation Publishing. Some scholarly articles on Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994) also published, like: *At Home in the Nation? Negotiating Identity in Shyam Selvadurai's Funny Boy1* by Sharanya Jayawickrama in Darwin College, University of Cambridge, UK and another journal by Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography Volume 12, Issue 2, 2005 *Because Pigs Can Fly: Sexuality, race and the geographies of difference* in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*. David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) was reviewed by Young Adult Literature (English Education Students of Grand Valley State University) in 2003.

Proposed methodology during the tenure of research work-

The *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (7th ed., 2009) will be carefully followed. The primary and secondary materials will be closely viewed and studied. The methodology will also include a judicious study and use of articles, reviews, interviews, books, online sources and material related to the study.

Expected outcome of the proposed work-

The proposed work will present an outlook upon homosexual relations and dilemma of such people. The work will also influence readers to find new perspectives in the current field.

Chapter I

Introduction

Gender Studies-

Gender studies is a field of interdisciplinary study and academic field devoted to gender identity and gender representation. This field includes women's studies (concerning women, feminism, gender, and politics), men's studies, and LGBT studies. LGBT is an initialization that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. The term is in use since the 1990s, it is an adaptation of the initials LGB, which itself started replacing "gay" when referred for the community, beginning in the mid-to-late of 1980s, as many felt the term "gay community" did not accurately represent all those to whom it refers. The term LGBT is intended to emphasize a diversity of sexuality and gender identity-based cultures. To recognize this inclusion, a popular variant adds the letter Q for those who identify as queer or are questioning their sexual identity as LGBTQ, recorded since 1996. More recently, to catch all the terms GSD ‘Gender and Sexual Diversity’ has been proposed.

In the proposed work, these sexual diversities and gender identities have been discussed in detail. The characters are contrasted against their societies and adversities. R.Raj Rao presents a bleak picture of gays in India. Shyam Selvadurai details his characters in their traditional and conventional background. David Levithan’s society is an open one and his characters hardly ever lived in a fearful environment. Nevertheless, in all the select works writers are in view to legalize and systematize both characters and society for a better understanding.

Chapter – II

Queer studies and queer theory – Gender and Sex

Queer studies or study of sexual diversities is the study of issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity. The study basically focuses on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people and their cultures. Originally centered on LGBT history and literary theory, the field has expanded to include the academic study of issues raised in biology, sociology, anthropology, the history of science, philosophy , psychology , sexology, political science, ethics, and other fields by an examination of the identity, lives, history, and perception of queer people.

Queer theory is a field of post-structuralist critical theory that emerged in the early 1990s out of the fields of queer studies and women's studies. Queer theory includes both queer readings of texts and the theorization of 'queerness' itself. Queer theory builds both upon feminist challenges to the idea that gender is part of the essential self, also upon gay and lesbian studies to their close examination of socially constructed nature of sexual acts and identities. Queer theory expands its focus to encompass any kind of sexual activity or identity that falls into normative and deviant categories.

Gender is the range of physical, mental, and behavioral characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between, masculinity and femininity. Sexologist John Money introduced the terminological distinction between biological sex and gender as a role in 1955. Before his work, it was common to use the word "gender" to refer both gender identity and sexual orientation. John Money's meaning of the word did not become widespread till the break of seventies, when feminist theory embraced the distinction between biological sex and the social construct of gender. Hence, the distinction between sex and gender distinguishes sex as the biological makeup of an individual's reproductive anatomy or secondary sex characteristics, from gender. Gender is an individual's lifestyle often learned culturally or personal identification of one's own gender or gender identity.

Chapter – III

Identity crisis and fight for acceptance-

The chapter entirely focuses on the general problem of identity crisis and fight for acceptance among gay characters in the select works. The select works minutely describes the problem of relating self to an identity which could be socially acceptable. Social acceptance always plays a vital role not only in deciding gender roles but an individual's identity as an important member of the society.

R.Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend* (2003) gives a picture of eccentric Indian society, which is neither against nor in favour of gay people but it ignores their presence and avoids their need. His novel, *Hostel Room 131*(2010) is a peep into the life of gay teens living in early 80s. Here also, these gay teens Siddharth and Sudhir live in constant fear of being revealed as homosexuals among their friends. It is important to note that R. Raj Rao is not intended to provide a solution or answer raised in his text. He simply leaves for his reader to draw his own conclusions.

Shyam Selvadurai from his debutant novel *Funny Boy* (1994) to his current work *Hungry Ghost* (2013) presents the plight of gays in a country which has denied their existence and where homosexuality is a punishable crime. All of his protagonists either came from Canada or leave Colombo forever to find a better life. In all his works these gay characters undergo a severe social trauma and absolute ignorance from their families. Whether it is Arjie, a young 14 years boy of *Funny Boy* or a mature man, Balender from *Cinnamon Garden*, each time the protagonist had to accept social roles and conventional norms.

David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) and *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* (2010) are set in New Jersey, US, a society which welcomes all sorts of relation; gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, heterosexual and intersexual. *In Boy Meets Boy*, Paul and Noah two teen boys fall for each other but they seem to be too young to understand their feelings and become estrange only to meet towards the

end of the novel. Again in *Will Grayson, Will Grayson,* both protagonists living their separate lives find their relations with their partners confusing though they are mature enough to make it right. First Will Grayson who is living with his partner Tiny Cooper, wants his life to be simple and hidden but Tiny's musical high school band not only make them famous, also makes them known to everyone around. Another Will Grayson, a heartbroken teen is in love with his chat friend Isaac but for his bad luck Isaac is not a boy but a girl Maura. The novel is noteworthy, where these two teens undergo a new and unexpected heroic change. Interestingly social adjustment is not a big issue here than understanding and adjustment which these characters simply fail to realize.

Chapter – IV

Intertwined relations and frustrations-

The chapter will emphasize upon understanding and observing gay psychology through their somewhat confused and frustrated relations. These relations are confused because of their own immaturity and frustration is more of society born. R.Raj Rao's characters simply fight for their acceptance and ends up living separate lives to be socially approved. Shyam Selvadurai seems disinterested to try for an acceptance and his characters live their lives as strangers and frustrated forever. David Levithan's protagonists are all young teens and they are simply confused in a materialistic society where success and failure are above all relations. Moreover, it is notable that some of the characters even leave their partners to find better a friend even if she is a girl.

Chapter – V

The predicament – Society and Culture

The chapter will throw light upon the plight of gay characters in their society and adjustment of gay with their cultural norms. Family, society and culture all have their decisive roles in an individual's life and it is same with these gay characters. Indian society in R.Raj Rao's works appear hypocrite and culturally conventional. Sri Lankan society in Shyam Selvadurai's novels is extremely against homo – males and any kind of homosexuality. David Levithan's society is just in contrast to both Indian and Sri Lankan societies but some characters still face agitation due to their conventional and cultural family views. Moreover, relations have lost their warmth and thus, protagonist of David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* and *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*, suffer for in their relation due to their too money-oriented society.

Chapter – VI

Gay – Mentally Ill or Sexually disordered

The chapter is important as it throws light on general belief that gays are actually mentally ill and sexually disordered. All the novelists in their fiction tried their level best to eradicate this common illusion. It is human nature to fall in love but it is society which decides on its grounds that homosexuality is not normal, though no theory and studies of psychology have shown that homosexuality is a mental disorder. Even looking into personal lives of these gay writers one can notice their normal behavior which has its direct influence on their works. All protagonists fight for their existence in their society and in their relations and which not abnormal. Every relation whether it is homosexual or so called normal need to fight for their existence and adjustment not only in their relation but also in their society.

Psychologists and biologist are still busy in finding the reason behind homosexuality and what causes homosexuality, so far it is normal.

Chapter – VII

Conclusion

The current work would try to bring in light the problems and ignorance that these characters suffer. Homosexuality is not a crime both in India and USA, only Sri Lankan constitution denies their existence. Various other countries have made law for the protection of gay rights and legitimize their relations too. In the year 2000 Civil Union/Registered Partnership laws and US was the first to accept it in Vermont, then Africa, UK, Germany in the year 2001. India too passed a law Decriminalisation of homosexuality on 4th of August 2009. Even gay marriages are not unlawful in India. In Sri Lanka homo-sexuality is illegal under a broad provision dealing with, "gross indecency". Though LGBT may have acquired some position both in literature and society but it is still a long way for them to go.

The acceptance and proper place for gays in society would only come with better understanding of homosexual people. Moreover, there is no theory proven so far which says they are abnormal, sexual desires are in born but their practice are learned and whether partner is of same sex or opposite it largely depend upon individual’s own choice. Homosexuals cannot be corrected as they are not wrong, it is simple that some people born to “think that way”.

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List of published papers of the candidate: Nil

Signature of the Supervisor

Signature of the Co- supervisor

Signature of the Candidate

Forwarded

Chairman, DRC